

“Process Leadership”

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Process Leadership...

- Used in work we are doing with cities and other public organizations
- Leadership takes responsibility for the form of the conversations that take place and for who participates in them
- Leadership does not prejudge the content or results of those conversations
- Leadership is distributed throughout the organization, but those “at the top” have special responsibilities for creating space for others to lead and for providing resources

Organizational Profile: Public Dialogue Consortium...

- Organizational structure
 - Nonprofit: 501(c)(3)
 - Chaordic organization
- Distinctive characteristics:
 - Values-based
 - Grounded in communication theory
 - Integrates service delivery with basic and applied research
- See: www.publicdialogue.org

PDC's Commitments (stated simply...)

- Communication matters...

The form of communication makes some things easy, others hard, still others “real.” If you get the right people involved in the right form of communication, good things happen.

- Dialogue is good...

The “social worlds” dialogue makes have desirable qualities when compared to those made by more common communication forms such as command-and-report, debate, diatribe-and-passive aggression, etc.

Some Descriptions of Dialogue

- Martin Buber: “remaining in the tension between standing your own ground and being profoundly open to the other.”
- Stephen Littlejohn: “speaking so that others want to listen, and listening so that others want to speak.”
- Martin Buber: “the ‘I’ of ‘I-thou’ is not the same ‘I’ as the ‘I’ of ‘I-it.’”

Questions about public dialogue

- Is it possible for communication in public and in organizations to have the desirable characteristics of dialogue?
- Are decisions made in dialogic communication better than those made in other forms of communication?
- What kind of relationships among leaders and subordinates develop when dialogic communication is the normal way of doing business?
- Do things “get done” when organizations communicate dialogically?

An Example of Process Leadership: The Cupertino Community Project

- See: Shawn Spano, Public Dialogue and Participatory Democracy. Hampton Press, 2001.
- The issue: rapid change from a monocultural to multicultural population
 - Good people, seriously concerned, not knowing how to go forward together; initial attempts had backfired; people were afraid to raise the issue for fear of what would occur
 - The topic was frequently discussed but only in homogeneous groups; it was “undiscussable” in public
 - Frequently heard: “This is a powder keg, waiting to explode”

Cupertino Community Project

- The Strategy:
 - Support for the process from “the top”, even though they knew that they would hear unpleasant things and that the process would appear “stalled” at times
 - Expert leadership through example, training, and facilitation, focusing on the form of communication (“public dialogue”)
 - Whole system participation in identifying the issue, framing and deliberating the options, and decision-making

Cupertino Community Project, continued

- Moving the decision-making phase to the end of the process, not at the beginning
- Constantly seeking to enrich the quality of the discussion of the issue
- Treating differences as welcome sites for exploration rather than problems to be resolved
- Consistent use of appreciative language
- Commitment to intergenerational meetings

Implications for Leadership

- Leaders took charge of the process rather than being committed to particular outcomes of the process. They were curators of the whole system's participation rather than advocates of specific causes.
 - This makes sense if you believe that:
 - The form of communication has consequences
 - The whole system is smarter than any one person
 - People support that which they are part of making

Implications for Leadership, Continued

- Leadership emerged at all levels of the community.
 - All participants took responsibility for the form of their own participation; the PDC trained many residents to facilitate large meetings, thus creating a cadre of trained leaders with special competencies
 - Participants in the process were committed to projects that they helped devise, and took responsibility for seeing that they were successful

The Process Leaders' Work

- The work of a “Process Leader” includes:
 - Making sure that conversations happen;
 - Ensuring that these conversations include all stakeholders
 - Expert design and facilitation of these conversations so that they are “dialogic”
 - Bringing their own technical expertise and judgment into the conversations as a participant
 - Providing resources for the implementation of decisions

Learnings from the Cupertino Community Project

- Public dialogue is possible, and expert facilitation and training helps
- Dialogic communication is:
 - Learnable
 - Teachable
 - Contagious
 - Addictive
- Unpredictable, good things happen in dialogic communication

Learnings, continued

- Need to have the whole system involved
- Need to make structural changes, and changes in the way the system works
- Need to make the process self-sustaining:
 - To include new residents
 - To respond to environmental changes
 - To respond to new challenges
 - To refresh the commitment of the community to dealing with issues dialogically

Contact Information

- The Public Dialogue Consortium works to improve the public communication about public issues. See: www.publicdialogue.org
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